


The Primal Poet

Julia P. Dabney

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BY

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*“The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of
the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.”*

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The Primal Poet

I

THERE were three brothers of the seed of Cain.
Jabal—a man hirsute and primitive
As his own shaggy flocks; for Jabal was
A mighty herdsman on the upland plains.
Then Tubal-Cain—the feat artificer—
Hewed wood and stone and hollow-clanging metal,
And fashioned implements for hut or chase.
A loud, rough man, with voice as thunderous
As his own roaring forge.
And, lastly, Jubal, scarce a stripling grown.
A silent lad, moulded in shapely form,
As lithe and slender as a sapling ash.
A broad-browed head, with toss of tangled curls,
'Neath which the eyes shone strange and cloudily,—
Gleaming, yet veiled; cobwebbed with phantasies
And swift bewildering dreams that found no word;
As winter pools will mirror back the stars,
But give no hint of their own shadowed depths.
And Jubal had no gifts.
Not yet he knew the gift supreme was his—
The gift of music; so he dwelt apart,

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An alien in a world of busy toil.
His brothers mocked him coarsely, with rude jibes,
And called him "wastrel", "monkey-witted", "frog";
For nothing that his fingers touched succeeded.
And if he holped the women, clumsily
All things would slip betwixt his skill-less hands
And shatter. If they sent him to the spring
He oft would fall a-musing—spirit-rapt—
And lose himself; while on the tumbling runnel
His water-gourds would drift forgotten down,
Like helmless argosies to some far shore.
His mother, Adah, chid him angrily.
"Why wilt thou be so backward?—thou, a man,
Comporting thee more like a weanling child!
For all the world doth toil and sweat, and earn
The bread it eats; but thou alone art idle:
Art thou not shamed?"
So Jubal walked alone, apart from men;
Troubled and tristful, plunged in moody thoughts
That strangely gripped him; sighing bitterly,
"I am not any use!" Then some wild bird,
Soaring on outspread vans to unknown heights,
Or flock of painted moths, or darting lizard,
Would lure him from his mood. For ardently
He loved all living things. The stealthy lynx,
And many a feral creature, confidently
Came fawning to his hand, for well they knew
'Twas symbol of caress, not enmity.
And, through this love he cherished for all earth,
He fain had been the earth's interpreter.

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He questioned Nature's inmost secrecies:—
The indirections of the elements,
The germinant life in root of tree, or flower,
And where the bee learned geometric lore;
Seeking to penetrate the core of things,—
The inexplicable Source.
Deep in the jungle, oftentimes he would lie
Bedded on moss, beside the lofty shaft
Of some primeval tree, close listening
To great winds playing symphonies above him
Through the arched branches;—many times low-keyed
To mystic sibillation; then again
A mighty complex of tumultuous rhythms.
And he would cry, "Oh they are singing—singing!
What is it that they sing?"
Or when his solitary footsteps led
Him far, beside the margent of some sea,
Where the uplifted, rainbow-shotted waves—
Vexed by the fitful winds, which tore their crests
To flying spindrift—rolled reverberantly,
To break in measured cadence at his feet,
Foaming about them; then his heart would leap
Within him in swift gladness, crying out,
"Oh they are singing—singing! What is it?"
But deeper still, within the soul of him
There stirred a nameless pang,—
A wistful undefined urge of life
That rent him with its vivid passioning.
A longing like a stream pent in the earth;
A voice that had no voice, seeking to find

THE PRIMAL POET

Some channel for expression, yet was barred
By impotence, and seethed back on itself,
Holding him dumb and inarticulate:—
Because his hour was not yet!

II

Beyond the plains where the great flocks were pastured
And nomad herdsmen led a sleepy life;
Beyond the vales where the rude husbandman
Furrowed the fecund soil; beyond, and yet
Beyond again, stretching to vast horizons,
The earth upheaved in countless broken hills—
Close-clad in verdure, teeming with wild growths—
That rose and rose in ever greatening grandeur
To larger, rougher shapes;—titanic shapes
Hurled one upon the other, like a heave
Of some stupendous ocean, sudden frozen,
And fixed forever in majestic chaos.
An overpowering chain of frowning heights,
Each farthest crest o'ertopping all the rest.
Swathed with rank forests, torn with ragged crags
That cleft the verdure like a purple scar
Against the glowing green; with dizzy precipices
Dropping to black abysses, unknown deeps,
Where the hoarse torrent thundered all day long
Alone, unvisited. A mighty range—
Impassable, forbidding; thus they seemed
To bar the far horizons of the world!
Then over all, and dominating all,
Immeasurably far and dim and grand,
With crest that seemed to pierce the very heavens,

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A single mountain towered imperially;—
A regal presence;—monarch among mountains.
The people viewed it awesomely, and called it
In underbreath, "The resting place of God."
No human foot had ever reached or dared
Its awful isolation;—never yet
Had crossed those adamantine barriers.
Rarely it might be looked on. Nebulous haze
Would blot it out; or storm clouds shrouded it;
Or else, in kindlier guise, aerial vapors
Wreathed it with filmiest draperies, wherein
It seemed to hide itself, withdrawn and rapt.
But sometimes in the crystal dawns, when winds
Reft it of veils, it lifted up its face
Rose-flushed, unearthly. Or at eventide,
When the wan twilight fell, and tender winds
Breathed with a faint susurrus as of wings
Lulling the senses, then the mountain shone
A luminous wraith against the velvet night.

Once when the sun sank down in ruddy splendor
Behind the encircling ranges, and the heavens
Were dyed to unimaginable tints,
The lifted peaks, by one and one, took on
A reflex glory, as if they had been
Great altars touched with sacrificial fire.
And then the pageant faded, and night fell,
While the great mountain, caught in the last rays,
Glowed like a furnace slowly dying down.
Then all went out, and through the darkling skies

THE PRIMAL POET

A galaxy of stars swam into sight.
And high above the monarch's head, one star,
Blazing alone to northward like a beacon,
Hung as if beckoning.
Jubal sat watching, shaken to the core
By subtle influences beyond himself:
Even as long ages since God's Spirit moved
Upon the water's face and waked a world.
Clutched by an inward urge he could not plumb,
(As sap must drive in trees when comes the spring)
He rose and girt him, crying passionately,
"I must go forth and find that holy place!
I must go forth and claim the beckoning promise!
There is a great voice calling—calling—calling!
I must go forth; and I must climb the mountain!"
So, in the mid-watches of the night,
When the high heavens were set with guiding lamps,
And the dark forest full of friendly whispers,
He started on his quest.
Long wandered he in those primeval wilds;
Long days and weeks and months, wildered and lost
'Mid that vast labyrinth of Nature; dazed
And sore-beset by many strange illusions
That led him hither, thither, aimlessly,
Confused and weary. Sometimes he would come
To interglades of dreaming loveliness,
So passing fair they seemed like Paradise.
So full of fragrance, beauty and delight
They ravished all the sense, and the drugged spirit
Would fain have lingered long. Again he passed

THE PRIMAL POET

By dark, mephitic pools, so wrapped in gloom
No light came there, nor flower, nor singing bird;
And only stealthy, loathly serpents crept
Gliding and coiling through the slimy ooze,
Like evil spirits haunting; and his soul
Recoiled in shuddering horror. Otherwhiles
He struggled through rank jungles, interwoven
With saurian creepers looped from branch to branch,
Armed with sharp thorns and lacerating spines
That tore the flesh; till every way seemed closed,
Forbidding and impenetrable. Then,
Dizzy with wandering, spent, unnerved and bleeding,
He would sink down amid the engirdling glooms,
Moaning, 'No use;—there is no way—no way!'”
But when his courage seemed at uttermost ebb,
Leaving his soul a desert, there would come
A movement through the tree-tops;—some keen wind
That tossed the branches, cleaving out a gap
Wherethrough, like a refulgent beacon lifted,
The beckoning Pole-star gleamed to lead him on!
Then he would rise, and, in reviving faith,
Brace him to fresh endeavor valorously;
Resolved to win those visioned heights or perish!
So—upward!—upward!—upward!
And each step brought him unto higher levels;
And each step left the lower far behind;
Until at last the dense primeval forests
Thinned visibly, and changed to smaller growths;
Then shrunk into a stunted, tangled boscage,
These yielding in their turn to herb and grass.

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And then all vegetation passed. He stood
Alone before the naked precipices
And awful, beetling crags, and savage gorges
That tore the mountain's breastwork like a breach.
Dark, loneliest places, ever overshadowed
By towering ledges; gulfs in whose lost depths
The mad roar of the raging cataracts
Deafened the senses, echoing back and forth.
But, as he trod those higher altitudes,
All weariness slipped from him as a cloud.
The rare air swept him like a pure elixir,
Quickening him to a wondrous buoyancy.
He walked as eagles soar—exultantly,
Nor knew the ground he trod on;—sward or flint,
All one to him,—as if his feet wore wings.
Youth seemed a thing eternal; strength, supreme.
And then it seemed all space was full of music,
And all the air alive and palpitant.
Whether he heard or felt or dreamed he knew not,
But all the void seemed pulsing with glad voices,—
The Cosmos all alive with thrilling voices;
A mighty-chorded canticle of praise;
As if the universe itself were vocal!
At first a single tone rose on his ear,
Then doubled; then another and another
Added, attuned, and filling out a chord
Of inconceivable, thrilling harmony!
And, as the music smote upon his spirit,
Something within him opened. 'Twas as if
Locked chambers suddenly flung wide their portals,

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And through the dim, long-cloistered places streamed
A flood of sunlight, blotting out the dark.
So light and joy flooded his whole, whole being.
Thus doth a flower open to the day;
First the close-folded bud that hides the core,
Nor knows its destiny; then, one and one,
Petal by petal—tremulous, but compelled
By unknown inward force—each folded back
Upon the other, till wide-spread they lie,
With the full heart surrendered to the sun!
And when at last he reached the mountain's summit
And stood upon the utmost pinnacle,
With the world coiled far off, beneath his feet,
It seemed to him all space was rife with flame, —
Great tongues which sang, and dazed him with their splendor;
Identities shrouded in mystic fire,—
As they might be gate-wardens of the Fulness.
In this suffusion of refulgent light
His spirit shed its bonds—and found itself;
Swept in, caught up, transfigured thus:—and lo!
The Fulness opened unto him!

* * * * *

Long afterwards—(he knew not if 'twere moments
Or hours his spirit rested in that joy)—
Charged with the inspiration of his vision,
A living lyre for God to play upon,
He raised his arms—as do the Seraphim,
Saluting the Ineffable—and broke
Into ecstatic song.

THE PRIMAL POET

THE SONG OF JUBAL

ON THE MOUNTAIN TOP

I

A wind of God is blowing from the morning!
A wind of God is blowing—blowing—blowing!
A breath of God is flowing—
Is flowing through all manifest creation:
The measureless void, the interstellar spaces,
The heights, the depths, and nethermost places!
Through every clustered constellation;
Through all the forces that the world engirth,
And every meanest form upon the earth.
A vital pulse is flowing—flowing—flowing
Through man, and beast, and flower, and rock and tree,
All entity bestowing.
A pulse of life—life—life!—
The one, one Life indissoluble;
Supreme and inconceivable;—
The immanent Mystery;
Life of all things that are;—
Of tiniest atom and of loftiest star!

II

The universe is keyed to mightiest music!
The universe is singing—singing—singing!
The great stars on their orbic ways go swinging
To ordered rhythms. Celestial space is full

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Of cadences ineffable;
And down the aethers glancing,
The atoms in a rhythmic round are dancing.
The void is full of palpitating motion
And murmurous vibrations through the air,
Like a suffused sound-ocean;
For sound is everywhere.
The firmament is singing—singing—singing!—
The morning stars are singing!
And heaven and earth are ringing
With litanies supernal;
A song of life eternal!
And evermore the theme is God—God—God!
And evermore the theme, the Living God!
Nor is man least in all this uttered word;
Nor is man last in these great harmonies;—
Not an ephemeral thing—a day-long mote,
But every soul one tone, one note—
Fitted, attuned—in some transcendent chord
That down the avenues of Time doth blazon
God's infinite diapason!

III

Awake!—arise!
Arise and greet the glory of the morning!
The dusts of earth are in your eyes,
And blinding you from seeing,
And numbing you from knowing
The vital fires ever flowing—flowing
'Twixt God and Man;—the ultimate of being!

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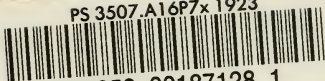
Ourselves do breed the vapors that enfold us,
The mists of time and flesh and sense that hold us.
We walk the earth in travail and confusion,
Fogged in self-spun miasmas of illusion.
We crucify the higher with the lower.
Beauty and grace and power,
Which do encompass us and are our dower,
We pass as blind men; nor perceive
The ever-during pulse by which we live!
Man was not born to sweat and toil and perish
Like a dumb beast that hath no consciousness
Above his sordid impulse; but to cherish
Those inward fires divine, and to express
The majesty of his real destiny.
Man was not born a clod;
He is a son of God!
Awake!—awake!—awake!
The blinding sense-dream break!
Rise to full stature, and so take
Your place amid the companies that sing
God's wondrous ordering!

Then all the folk abiding on the plains,
And all the dwellers in the happy valleys,
Roused from their slumbers by they knew not what,
Stricken with sudden terror and confusion,
Rushed from their wattled huts and from their caves,
Crying, "Fly!—fly! The whirlwind is upon us!"
But lo! there was no wind, no roil, no tempest;
Only the impulse of a strange vibration,

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A nameless something past all power of gauging,
That moved and shook them though they understood not:—
Far echoes of sublime ethereal music.
They seemed to feel a mighty rushing—rushing,
As of great wings, swept swiftly through the aethers;
And then they heard a rushing sound of voices—
Of multitudinous voices.
And as they gazed in stupified amazement
Whence the sound came,—into the vast perspective
The mountain masses brooded duskily;
While over all, in lone supremacy,
The sovereign mountain through the midnight skies
Gleamed like a fire-opal, shot with flame.
And high above the topmost pinnacle—
Hung like a beacon betwixt earth and heaven—
The immutable Pole-star blazed.

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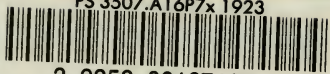
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